Maugham's Remarkable Novel About a Genius

By N. P. D.

IF we were able to say exactly what we think, like the man in *The Moon and Sixpence*, we might do justice to W. Somerset Maugham's extraordinary novel. But few of us, even if we would, can express exactly what we think or feel or see, which is probably the reason why more of us are not "authentic" geniuses like Charles Strickland (and Mr. Maugham himself, undoubtedly) in this story. Even the dreariest Dreiser only succeeds in saying what he wants to think, or what he thinks his friends will applaud and consider exceedingly courageous and clever in him for thinking. As Mr. Maugham says, among a great deal that is acute in his book: "It is not difficult to be unconventional in the eyes of the world when your unconventionality is but the convention of your set. It affords you an enormous amount of self-esteem."

The ordinary alleged truth-telling novel is almost inevitably dull, even if it is supposed to be enlightening. The reason for the absorbing interest and vitality and excitement of Mr. Maugham's grotesque but tragically real study of an artistic genius must be just this—that he has come near to saying what he thinks, and to showing a man as he is, stripped of every convention and romantic trapping or realistic drab. The result is alternately shocking and exhilarating; and again moving. Mr. Maugham has found the bleeding wound in the artist; "it's hell to paint," says Strickland. He has also found the cloven hoof, and it is ugly.

Charles Strickland wants to do only one thing in the world—paint. The sooner we get this into our heads the nearer shall we be to understanding him. Mr. Maugham makes the narrator of the story observe that it seems strange even to himself, after he has described a man as cruel, selfish, brutal, sensual, to say that he was a great idealist. But the fact remains Strickland was brutal, sensual and all the rest, because he was an idealist. "He was single hearted in his aim, and to pursue it he was willing to sacrifice not only himself—many do that—but others. He had a vision. Strickland was an odious man, but I still think he was a great one." This is the remarkable fact of Mr Maugham's accomplishment. He makes his artist odious enough, heaven knows; but he also makes the reader believe in his genius, and to be a little in awe of it.

Wells rang a bell in one of his novels a few years ago with the astonishing discovery that sex is not the whole of life, but only a part of it, and not a very big part. The news made something of a sensation at the time, since fiction for many years had been passionately proving the contrary. But it is just here, as Mr. Maugham would say, that fiction is unreal. "There are few men to whom love is the most important thing in the world, and they are not very interesting ones."

II.

Perhaps it is because Charles Strickland, a successful London stock broker when the story opens, was not considered interesting, especially by his charming wife's artistic friends, that when, after having been married seventeen years, he suddenly bolted and went to Paris to paint, without making any provision for his family (and seeing no reason why he should), another woman was taken for granted—a girl in the tea shop at least, if not a French dancer. The friendly emissary who followed Strickland to Paris to tell him people do not do such things, especially if they are 40 and have a charming wife and two children, was cut short by Strickland, who asked, why not? "I've supported her for seventeen years. Why shouldn't she support herself for a change?"

As for the other woman, the friendly emissary, upon his return to London, when the charming wife breathlessly asks him, "Who is she?" knew that he had a bombshell when he truthfully reported, "There isn't any woman."

Mr. Maugham shows Strickland living alone, except when people put themselves in his way, or a wife is joyously offered him as in Tahiti; in no "set" and with no pose; suffering hell, and willing that everybody else shall go to hell if he can paint. If he is sick he must be cared for; if he is hungry he must be fed; if he needs a studio another man must be thrown out of his own; if he needs a woman another man's wife will serve as well as any if she happens to be around. Strickland says:

"I don't want love. I haven't time for it. It's weakness. I am a man, and sometimes I want a woman. When I've satisfied my passion I'm ready for other things. I can't overcome my desire, but I hate it; it imprisons my spirit; I look forward to the time when I shall be free from all desire and can give myself without hindrance to my work. Because women can do nothing but love, they've given it a ridiculous importance. They want to persuade us that it's the whole of life. It's an insignificant part."

It may be surmised that much in the story is not pleasant, but although it is unspeakably brutal, it is not as unpleasant as might be expected. The original feature of this portrait of an artist is that he is not represented as deliberately making other people serve his purpose. Strickland wants no "inspiration" from others, least of all from a woman perhaps. He creates alone, and only asks of other people that they keep out of his way—or not whine about the consequences. "I'm afraid you disapprove of me," he sardonically says to a friend. "Nonsense," the friend comes back. "I don't disapprove of the boa constrictor; on the contrary, I'm interested in his mental processes."

III.

But even those who do disapprove, decidedly, of the boa constrictor, must confess to being interested in Strickland—although their interest and sympathies may not go as far as Dirk Stroeve's.

This Stroeve is another artist, a Hollander, who has the most to overlook in Strickland. Yet he turns his cheek again and again with what his friends regard as a most unmanly weakness. To Stroeve, however, the matter is simple. Strickland has genius, which must be honored as the most wonderful thing in the world. "It's a great burden to its possessors. We should be very tolerant with them and very patient." It sounds almost like the application of the new criminology to the artist.

Stroeve and his quiet but arresting wife are among the most brilliant characterizations in the book. Blanche Stroeve looks like the "pleasant housewife in her mob-cap and apron," immortalized by Chardin; but it is said of Blanche: "Her tranquillity was like the sullen calm that broods over an island which has been swept by a hurricane." Stroeve himself is a bad painter, but not an unsuccessful one (if this latter is not superfluous), and his life with his wife was an idyl, until the coming of Strickland; in which idyl, however, Stroeve himself always cut a ridiculous figure. As Mr. Maugham says: "It is hard that a man's exterior should tally so little sometimes with his soul. Dirk Stroeve had the passion of Romeo in the body of Sir Toby Belch."

Yet when Mr. Maugham seeks to express the inexpressible about art or beauty or life, he generally puts the words into the little countryman of Rubens—as when Stroeve says of beauty that the artist having created it, it is not given to all to know it. "To recognize it you must repeat the adventure of the artist. It is a melody that he sings to you, and to hear it again in your own heart, you want knowledge and sensitiveness and understanding"; or again, after his idyl has suddenly shown the leering mask of tragedy, when Stroeve gently succumbs to a philosophy of renunciation:

"The world is hard and cruel. We must be very humble. We must see the beauty of quietness. We must go through life so inconspicuously that Fate does not notice us. And let us seek the love of simple, ignorant people. Their ignorance is better than all our knowledge. Let us be silent, content in our little corner, meek and gentle like them. That is the wisdom of life."

IV.

The Tahiti end of the story seems remote, something that might have happened long before Strickland's vivid presence in London and Paris, or long afterward. Perhaps this is due to the strangeness of the scenes described, and to the shuttle-like manner of the telling (not unlike Conrad)—going back and forth, picking up a detail here and another there, from any one who knew Strickland But even in the Tahiti chapters, we have the impression of the same desire on the part of the novelist to shake off all sentimentality, and be plain spoken. The portrait of the fat proprietress of the hotel in Papeete is one of the best portraits in the book; Rubenesque in its frank and happy Mother Hubbard unmorality

The earlier part of the story is excellent comedy, full of amusing things, and better than anything the author has done for the stage, from which it may be hoped he has retired for a while if he has another novel as good as *The Moon and Sixpence* up his sleeve. It is a novel so interesting that the world that runs (when it does not skip) while it reads will enjoy it, and the more cautious and serious among readers will be elate.

THE MOON AND SIXPENCE. By W. Somerset Maugham. George H. Doran Company.

A Modern Novel From the Japanese

By CONSTANCE MURRAY GREENE

PEOPLE have been known to adopt husbands in this country, but it has never become a legal institution. In Japan a husband selected in boyhood and trained according to the tastes of his affianced family is considered a more profitable investment than Government bonds. It is such an arrangement that Futabatei's *An Adopted Husband* pictures—the straits in which Tetsuya found himself after the heavy hand of adoption had fallen upon him. That the fate of these youths is not altogether happy is indicated by the Japanese aphorism, "Do not become an irimuko (adopted husband) if you have one measure of rice."

Tatsunosuke Hasegawa, who wrote under the pseudonym Futabatei Shimei, is the most noted member of the modern Japanese literary group. *An Adopted Husband* is the first piece of modern Japanese fiction to be translated into English and will engross almost any one who picks it up. Futabatei writes in a direct and telling style, giving the desired effect in much the manner of the Japanese painters with the fewest possible strokes. He never wastes time. A man is described with delightful economy. "His features seemed to be one on top of another, thus giving him a look of vulgarity." The impression is unforgettable.

The directness of the author's method is shown by his plunge into the midst of the story. We are not dragged through the intricacies of the domestic and academic training which lead to the opening scene. Tetsuya, the adopted husband, is well in the matrimonial coils when we first see him and they are growing more matrimonial all the time. He had a lazy and bad tempered wife and an evil eyed mother-in-law, who could have given any Occidental rival fine points in deviltry.

In harmony with an apparently fixed Japanese custom, Sayo-ko, daughter of the deceased master of the house and a housemaid, lives along with the more legitimate members of the family. She is the heroine of the story and is probably the national feminine ideal as her charms are described as irresistible, including unusually active joints and tear duets. What time she is not kneeling and bowing and prostrating herself she is either furtively or openly mopping up her tears or "with a sad sobbing scream throwing herself on the floor, her shoulders heaving like waves." In this her affinity with the hero may be traced. As Tetsuya relaxes with the progress of the story it is not uncommon for him to sob himself to sleep. (Not that we blame him for it, nor for the general bow-leggedness of his morals.) It is evident from the start that if Tetsuya had been adopted as Sayo-ko's husband he would have been well satisfied. As it was he spent his money on ginrickies, instead of the jinrikishas that his wife and mother-in-law craved.

Hamura, a family friend and the fifth member of the group from which the character study is made, typifies the unscrupulous and successful materialist. Early in the book he advises Tetsuya:

"You wish to succeed without doing anything dishonorable, don't you? He, he! Take my advice: You'd better be satisfied with teaching for the rest of your life and be good natured." It seems strange that with such spontaneous exuberance of emotion in most respects the Japanese mirth should be mechanical. One is constantly struck by the incongruity of passages like this:

"The two laughed merrily together.

"Ha, ha, ha.

"Ho, ho, ho!"

—with others such as, "she gnashed her teeth and burst into tears."

Returning for a moment to Hamura, we quote the closing paragraph of the book in which his phenomenal success is pictured—"It is said that he has made much money by speculation, and that he expects to have a carriage of his own by the time he is 40 years of age."

This book, like any piece of real literature, emphasizes the world identity of romantic emotion, and yet it is most interesting in its revelation of the dissimilarity in the manner of expressing and regulating this common foible. How many of our married couples would respond with docility to the offices of the official go-between? "I wish to ask some one to make up their quarrel," a well wisher will say, "but Yanase-san, their go-between, has gone to Nagasaki." And from time to time through the story the go-between is introduced in a perfectly casual manner, though it is to be noted that he does scarcely better in the way of patching up an unsuccessful marriage than the fireside cat might do the same role.

AN ADOPTED HUSBAND. Translated from the Japanese of Futabatei by B. Mitsiu and Gregg M. Sinclair. Alfred A. Knopf.

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